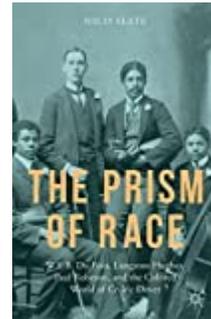




Nico Slate. *The Prism of Race: W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and the Colored World of Cedric Dover.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 268 S. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-137-48409-3.



Reviewed by Elisabeth Engel

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (August, 2015)

N. Slate: Prism of Race

The scholarship that takes up W.E.B. Du Bois's thesis that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea – fills libraries around the globe. Ever since the African American race leader defined the concept in "Souls of Black Folk" in 1903, it figured prominently in research on the United States and the transnational contexts of Western imperialism. Nico Slate, a historian at Carnegie Mellon University, is no exception. His research on social movements in the United States and India has long explored how black Americans and colonial subjects advanced their struggles against white supremacy. His most recent book, "The Prism of Race", makes the case that this struggle did not just pose the problem of race, but also that of color.

The story of the twentieth century that unfolds from the perspective of people defined as colored is the subject of Slate's account. He traces it through the lens of Cedric Dover (1904–1961), an Anglo-Indian biologist, who dedicated his work to the study of race and his political ambition to the movement toward Afro-Asian solidarity.

Dover was born in colonial Calcutta, one year after Du Bois's historic prediction. Slate shows that Dover was one of those "men in Asia and Africa," whose libraries were filled with Du Bois's and other African Americans' writings. Precisely, Dover's personal library, comprising his writings and reading, is Slate's main primary source.

What makes Dover's so far little studied holdings a historically relevant legacy for Slate is that he was a so-called "half-caste." This segment of Indian colonial society was the progeny of British and Indian sexual unions and held an intermediate position between colonizers and colonized. Slate argues that Dover's mixed ancestry prompted his extensive investigations of race and his solidarity with ethnic minorities, including African Americans. Both distinguish Dover from most of the "Eurasian" population which used its Anglo-Indian origin to pass for white. Dover, Slate demonstrates in the mold of a carefully written intellectual biography, asserted his "Eurasian" identity. As such, he serves us to trace what Slate calls "one of the most creative redefinitions of racial identity in the twentieth century – the invention of the colored world" (p. 2).

Indebted to the image of the prism, Slate's analysis of Dover takes the reader through facets, not phases, of this re-definition. Chapter 1 introduces Dover's Colored Cosmopolitanism, a concept Slate has studied in greater detail elsewhere. Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism. The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India*, Cambridge MA 2012. Slate identifies Dover's specific approach to working toward worldwide colored solidarity as one that avoids strong racialism and color-blind neutrality. Colored cosmopolitans, as Slate quotes Dover, were both racial and anti-racial at the same time. By this Dover meant that they embraced racial hybridity as their identity (p. 19).

This core argument of Dover sets the time frame of Slate's analysis. Slate roughly starts with Dover's major publications on hybridity, *Cimmerii: Or Eurasians and Their Future* (1929) and *Half-Caste* (1937), and ends with his death in 1961. Otherwise, the empirical analysis is organized by sets of relationships between Dover and Du Bois, Langston Hughes and Paul Robeson, two more towering African American leaders, with a focus on the mid-twentieth century. In each of them, Slate explores how Dover's idea of unifying the colored world without reifying race was shaped by his contacts and conversations with the scholar in question. The result are three different concepts of race, namely: race as an *Autobiography* drawn from Du Bois (Ch. 2), *as Propaganda* drawn from Hughes (Ch. 3), and *as Solidarity* drawn from Robeson (Ch. 4). All of these existed in Dover's colored world at the same time. Albeit these chapters deal with well-known African American texts and authors, Slate's reading succeeds in foregrounding new aspects. He focuses on how they spoke to Dover as a colored man and what he made of them. The analysis must be credited for its well-dosed presentation of African American ideas before their appropriation by Dover, so that Dover's intellectual enterprise becomes graspable and fascinating.

To this, Slate adds an intriguing chapter on *The Black Artist and the Colored World* (Ch. 5). Here Slate shifts his analysis from the African American impact on Dover's notion of color, to Dover's impact on African American notions of blackness. The chapter discusses Dover's last book, *American Negro Art* (Greenwich, CT, 1960). This anthology was reprinted five times and became a classic in the field of black studies. According to Slate, Dover saw the book as a product of the transna-

tional collaboration between the African American community and the worldwide struggle against racism (p. 116). The view was indebted especially to the Bandung Conference of 1955, the first gathering of representatives of black America and newly independent states in Asia and Africa to forge their solidarity. Slate concludes with offering an outlook of the contexts in which Dover's understanding of being racial and antiracial became relevant. He discusses colored cosmopolitanism as a dimension of the American Black Power movement, Third World Feminism, the movement for environmental justice, and the ongoing debate about whether the United States is moving toward a postethnic stage.

Slate's conclusion broadens his scope of analysis considerably from the intellectual biography of Dover. It is less a summary of findings than a way to explore Dover's colored cosmopolitanism further. Some of the perspectives the concept offers are presented by Slate himself right away. In addition to his main analysis, Slate discusses a few instances at which notions of color became relevant for migrants from Asia and Africa in the United States in the preface *Of Color*. In his epilogue on *Barack Obama and Race as Freedom*, Slate sees some similarities in the self-identifications that Dover and the current American president chose as people who were born mixed in highly racialized societies. He closes with an afterword on the *Library of the Colored World*, in which he takes us to the writings and readings Dover stored in the attic of his home in a village south of London. This section discusses both Slate's primary material and the African American canon that Dover helped to build.

Slate's account takes up a wide variety of historically African American themes including concepts of the color line, race, oppression, and transnational agitation and deepens them with original research on Cedric Dover. Through Dover, Slate traces the formation of these concepts in the colonial periphery and places them into the transnational contexts of color. The book thus shows us that colored intellectuals were not just fighting a similar cause, but interconnected. In this sense, Slate's account is less a biography than an entangled history of ideas that guides the study of race beyond its implicit focus on the West and that de-marginalizes colonialism in the study of African Americans.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

Citation: Elisabeth Engel. Review of Slate, Nico, *The Prism of Race: W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and the Colored World of Cedric Dover*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. August, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44922>

Copyright © 2015 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.